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## THE ANTWERP WATER WORKS DURING THE WAR PERIOD<sup>1</sup>

I have had a double duty to perform during the recent years. It was first my duty to act as your manager; and secondly, I have had the other duty to obey the Germans. During these years of troubles, suffering, war and death, our company has not prospered. Difficulties have gained the better of us, and absorbed a great deal of our activity and profits. You will, however, make due allowance for the fact that it could not be otherwise, and that it would have deserved blame to have acted to the contrary and to prosper on the common adversity.

All our acts, consequently, during the time have been guided by one principle, to save the life of the company, to prevent its downfall under the blows of a criminal attempt, to make a stand without relenting to a tenacious foe. You may easily imagine we were not in a bed of roses, and that it was continuous vexation. It may be well to enter into some details, however. They are known to the directors but not to the shareholders. Some communication was maintained with the London office, but, for obvious reasons, nothing could be made public. Those communications were through Mr. Kemna, who remained in Holland for the purpose. Various ways had to be tried; and, as an instance, I may say now that a captain of a tugboat was very useful to us. First of all we were put under what was called "Zwangverwaltung." Literally this somewhat rough word means "managing by violence," a very proper expression.

At my first meeting with the German controller, a "Hauptmann," he looked very solemn and asked me to call into my office all members of the staff who had the power of signing the company's name. When he heard I was the only man he seemed disappointed; but he wanted an audience, and all the heads of the departments were summoned and he delivered a speech about as follows: "Be kind enough to remain on duty, all of you. We do not want any better,

<sup>1</sup> A statement made at the annual meeting of the Antwerp Waterworks Company in London, England, on May 12, 1919, by its resident manager. Mr. Van der Taelen.

we are so good-natured, but do not forget you are under military law. If you are unwilling you will be put in prison or sent to Germany. For the remainder, whatever money you collect belongs to us. Get as much cash as possible, and cut off without mercy customers who do not pay."

Well, we have undoubtedly insisted upon disconnecting the usual insolvent customers; and the Germans, taking advantage of the situation, for a number of German residents had re-entered Antwerp in a state of exaltation easy to picture, found fault with the collectors of an English company. But, to the others, to those whom we knew to be trusty persons, to the town of Antwerp, the suburbs and so on, we said: "Do not pay. In any case we have not too much money to give to the Germans." So it came about that at the end of the period of sequestration, which lasted fully two years, and after one year of liquidation, sundry creditors, and among them the town and suburbs, owed to the company a rather important amount of money. The system was altered at that time. By way of reprisals against the acts of you English people who have, as you well know, "set the example of all exactions," our works were put into liquidation. Some printed circulars were sent to Germany at our expense. Some "Herr Doktors" turned up, took measurements of our offices, paid a visit to Waelhem and Luythagen, tried to find fault with the installations in order to lower the price, and finally the liquidator informed us on October 3, 1917, that the concern was sold. As you will be able to ascertain, we have till this very day, for three full years, applied our dilatory politics, which may be summed up in this way: Sometimes say "Yes," sometimes say "No," but always do "No." But then, the delegate of the new owners "in partibus" resorted to threatenings, which were more in accordance with their peculiar mentality. "What was yours," he said, in fact, "we have taken; consequently it is ours. Your rights have become our rights, and you have not anything to say here. However, as all this will be definitive, until after the war is over, we are willing to keep you so as to make good all our irregularities. But we want absolute obedience, otherwise we dismiss you."

We gave to this the natural and expected answer: "All that belongs to our company remains its property. I naturally am here on the spot to stand up for its rights, and if you state officially that the transfer has been effected, I will protest officially and stand

up most positively for those rights which were conceded to us only. Neither the city of Antwerp nor myself will ever consent to retract anything whatever." The natural result followed. The usurper and I parted rather coolly. We were not made to agree. And it is a very happy circumstance that on this occasion the town acted in a fair and patriotic way, corroborating my views and not recognizing the transfer of the concern. The town then brought the question before the court, which meant much delay, but happily this time it was soon settled, on November 11, 1918, by the Allied armies acting as judges. Next day I paid a visit to the delegates of the Germany company. They seemed rather crest-fallen and two days later missed an appointment they had made. They had taken the Berlin express via Holland and £1000.

The working results are not quite so bad as could be expected. The enemy has undoubtedly taken much from us, but I am sure, as you must be convinced, that this money will be given back. The tenacity and courage of those who saved us are a sufficient guaranty. At present it will be necessary to do useful work, and although we are a bit older our situation is still hopeful. During this troubled period we have not lost all our time. The contracts with the five most prosperous suburbs have been confirmed and lately we have been able to agree with two other communes. We may consequently hope to make up a part of the time lost. Meanwhile we are able to state now that the confidence we put in our fellow-citizens' honesty was justified. Up to May 1, 1919, 281,471 francs have been paid on the arrears, without difficulty; and these amounts are now making up a very good reserve, which is more useful here than in Germany. The situation of our ordinary business is also improving; and although it is rather difficult to ascertain when we shall be able to reach the pre-war receipts again, we notice already a good increase. Closed houses were reduced by 1803 on May 1, 1919.

The receipts during the first quarter of 1919 were 656,056 francs against 482,388 francs in the first quarter of 1918 and 749,650 francs in the first quarter of 1914. Big trade meters, for factory supplies, do not yet give the expected quantities. The shipping supply has greatly improved but more business can still be done there.

All this seems to indicate that notwithstanding still very unfavorable circumstances the vitality of our company has greatly improved,

and for the first time since many years I may express sincerely the opinion that the most troublesome times are over. In short, in our own sphere we hampered the enemy as much as we could, not by actual warfare but by striking at another weak place, the pocket. All the money saved from his grasp was so much less power to him and a profit to the legitimate owners.

*Addendum.* In addition to these remarks it is possible to add two other statements concerning the Antwerp water works during the war period. The former manager, Ad. Kemna, well known to many American water works engineers, made a report to the Belgium military authorities on methods of protecting the water supply of the city in case of siege. He suggested using the river water at the dry docks. Early in September, 1914, he called attention to this recommendation and measures were taken to carry the plan into effect. The river water was first treated with alum and clarified and then dosed with hypochlorite, after the enemy took possession of the source of supply at Waelhem.

The chairman of the company, George Evans, reported at the annual meeting that there was some damage done to the pumping station at Waelhem by artillery fire and that the uncompleted pre-filters at Notmeir were also damaged. A claim has been made against Germany for all damages done to the plant and for the money looted from its offices. In speaking of this claim the chairman made the following statement:

Whatever sum we may receive as compensation for the past losses, we cannot hope to be put back into our previous happy position. Even when we reach once more our pre-war revenue from sales of water, and it looks as though this result will be attained more rapidly than could have been expected, the amount of net revenue available for remittance to London must be seriously reduced. In the first place, salaries and labor charges are much higher, at least 50 per cent at the present time, with a tendency to increase, and an almost certain reduction in the working hours for some classes. This will mean at least £8000 a year. Coal is very dear and very bad; the pumping cost per cubic meter has increased from 0.028 to 0.07 franc. I hope that the price of coal may fall to some extent before long; and no doubt as soon as the world supply increases the quality will improve, but for the next year or two I think we must reckon on an additional cost on this account of at least £5000 a year.